COMMISSION ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

Montgomery County Council Health and Human Services (HHS) Worksession
FY 10 Top 2 Policy Issues
September 16, 2009
Bill Gray, Chair | Jonathan Walker, Vice Chair

Good Morning, my name is Bill Gray, and I am here presenting the top two policy issues of the Commission on Veterans Affairs for FY10.

1. The County needs to adopt a policy and platform to recognize active military and veterans for their service to our country to preserve our freedom.
We recommend that the County:

- Recognize Veterans as a constituency in County public relations, outreach efforts, employment, and mission statements.
- Identify upfront during any departmental intake process if the individual or any immediate family member ever served in the U.S. Armed Forces, National Guard or Reserves, so that they all can be assessed for state and federal programs that they may be eligible for such as respite care for families with children who have developmental disabilities, or home care for veterans who are seniors. Uma Ahluwalia, Director, HHS has already agreed to do this and we thank her for that.
  We will be working with Corrections and Police and other identified departments to do the same. We recommend that the Office of Human Resources work with MCGEO and other County unions to identify employees who are veterans and/or family members of veterans or County employees who are on active duty, and offer support to them.
  We encourage the County to ask all contractors and grantees to collect this same information in the intake process and supply this data to the County.
- Require all departments to apply for federal grants/seek out partnerships with the private and non-profit sector that would benefit Veterans and their spouses and children.
- Develop an Annual Veterans Recognition Plan in partnership with our Commission which has short term and long term outcomes, and in particular plan to honor those soldiers who have made the ultimate sacrifice with input from their family members. This would include Memorial Day and Veterans Day programs to honor families, and County events that provide free passes to Veterans and family members.

2. The County should establish a Veteran's Service Office, similar to the Commission for Women, so that Veterans can identify a place that they can relate to in which to obtain information and services from the County, Commission and state and federal agencies in a proactive environment that supports Veterans and their families, with no stigma attached.

- It would serve as a clearinghouse for veterans and their families, a one stop shop for Benefits and Claims Office where we would partner with State and Federal benefits workers to do intake and counseling in Montgomery County. In regards to poverty, there are homeless veterans and other veterans and their family members who may be eligible for benefits. Sadly, 95% of all homeless vets have been incarcerated at one time in their life. 5.7% percent of veterans were living in poverty, compared to 12 % of non-veterans as of 2007 according to the American Community Survey.
- In addition to what we see as trained therapists rotating in, the Commission members and other volunteers would volunteer to provide peer counseling and facilitate workshops for veterans and their

spouses and children. Workshops might be conducted on finances, VA Home Loan Program, couple relationships, child raising tips, nutrition, wellness and health to name a few.

- We recommend that the County work with the Veterans Administration Medical Center to establish a Community Based Outreach Clinic (CBOC) in the County to provide medical and psychiatric care for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Traumatic Brain Injury, the most prevalent mental/behavioral health disorders among service members returning from overseas deployment in the community, not just the VA hospitals. This CBOC would also provide same services and coordinate the care with the VA through screening.
- The County can also work with those who can provide housing for the homeless and released incarcerated veterans. The County can provide additional benefits personnel to assist with filling out claims correctly, on a daily basis.
- The Silver Spring Vet Center provides male and female non-medical services (Individual and Group counseling) to returning veterans from Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom and other Theater Veterans and their families during non-traditional hours (evenings). Plus they do bereavement counseling for the families (all hours), outreach, PTSD, sexual trauma, substance abuse, family/marital, homeless, woman veterans and benefits, employment, and medical referrals to appropriate services for the Veteran (VA and non VA). A benefits specialist from the American Legion and a Disabled Veterans Outreach Program from the Montgomery County Employment Services comes to their office to meet with veterans once a week.
- The VA will treat vets for medical and psychiatric PTSD but not the families dealing with it unless they have been referred by a psychiatrist. We need the County to do the initial written diagnosis of PTSD by a M.D. related to their military service (both combat and non-combat related) in order to refer the veteran to the VA initially.
- The new out processing procedures catch the majority of PTSD cases but not all of them as PTSD can be delayed and triggered by reintegration/life stressors. Nobody likes to admit they have a problem and most deny it until they are forced to face it by their families or the courts. We should make it clear that any County resources for programming supplement, not replace, already available VA programs. These will include programs and support groups for **both** female and male veterans and their children in conjunction with PTSD and other service connected issues among the military community.

We appreciate the opportunity to advise you on these issues which we feel will help our Veterans in the County. We hope that the County will continue its legacy of being a responsive and accountable government. Thank you.

"Veterans helping Veterans"